

United States Embassy, Bern
Tenth Anniversary of September 11, 2001
Commemorative Event
Remarks by Deputy Chief of Mission Susan M. Elbow

On September 11, 2001 I was in Hamburg, Germany. I had just arrived to head our Consulate there. As it quickly became clear that the attacks were committed by terrorists and no one knew the scale or how many more might be coming, I was whisked by the German police out of the Consulate to a safe haven where I stayed for the next 18 hours surrounded by body guards. I tried to get some sleep, but it eluded me. I couldn't tear myself away from the news, and I wrestled with one unanswerable question after another. Who had done this and why? Would there be more attacks? How would we pick up the pieces? As the city that had welcomed and educated Mohammed Atta, the leader of the hijackers, Hamburg was horrified to learn of its connection with the attacks and that it was the center of numerous investigations.

For the entire following year, I collected tributes and donations from shocked and grieving Germans. They gave

millions of dollars for the victims; I met 9/11 widows and police and fire fighters who the city of Hamburg invited as guests; I received poems and paintings and quilts and sculptures and condolence books by the hundreds. One family lit candles near the Consulate for an entire year to express their sympathy with the families of the victims and their solidarity with the United States. I was incredibly moved over and over again by the depth of the feelings expressed and by the thousands of actions taken by Germans who wanted to show that the terrorists were wrong, that people of all faiths could live together peacefully in the world, that there was no room for violence and destruction and the murder of innocent people in their world.

While the intensity of those days has faded, what bound us then still holds today: a belief in the power of standing together against violent extremism; a belief in the strength that comes from our diversity; and a belief in compassion and in the capacity to rebuild.

The week before last I was in New York and went to ground zero. In the mid-80's I had worked in Tower One of the Trade Center. My boss had been the moving spirit behind getting the

complex built, and I knew the engineering and architectural marvels the Towers showcased. But one aspect always bothered me. To arrive at street level one had to cross a desolate windswept plaza which was neither inviting nor very usable. Ground Zero today is alive with the sounds of rebuilding. When construction is finished, it will be a very different place. The new design brings the complex back into being part of the city, with shops and restaurants at street level and lots of trees and benches inviting people in. Before the attacks, downtown New York was known as a commercial district that was all but abandoned come 6 p.m. It's now one of the fastest-growing neighborhoods in the city with double the number of residents it had on 9/11. There is an energy and purposefulness in all the construction and lots of thought has gone into the plans for the area, which include not only the 9/11 Memorial, but also a new performing arts center.

Nationally, 9/11 has become a day of service and remembrance as a way of honoring the victims and actually doing something to make the world better, safer, more compassionate, more united. The 9/11 generation – those just coming of age at the time of the

attacks – has volunteered in huge numbers, both domestically and in the U.S. military. Many of those directly affected by the attacks have sought to make sense out of the tragedy by serving others, some dedicating their lives to the endeavor. Let me mention just three examples I find uplifting.

To honor their 25-year old son Peter who was killed in the Trade Center, his parents founded the Peter C. Alderman Foundation which helps heal the invisible, psychological wounds of trauma. More than 10,000 victims of terrorism and mass violence in Africa and Asia have been treated by health workers trained by the Alderman Foundation.

Tuesday's Children is an organization founded by Families who lost relatives in the attacks and helps those between the ages of 15-20 from around the world who have lost family members to an act of terror. The organization sponsors an annual eight-day camp and counts among those who have attended the survivors of the Beslan school hostage crisis in Russia.

Beyond the 11th is an organization founded by two women who were pregnant on 9/11 and became widows. While they had a

great deal of support, they realized that other widows, particularly in war-torn parts of the world had none. They chose to focus on Afghanistan and have helped hundreds of widows there. In 2006 the founders were finally able to travel to Afghanistan themselves. Their journey was documented in the award-winning film Beyond Belief.

I could go on and on about the great work that survivors, family members of those killed and many other citizens have done to honor the victims, to give others hope, to present a positive vision of life and the good that's possible to follow something as horrific as the September 11th terrorist attacks.

What I hope, however, is that all of us here in whatever way, be it a tiny single action or a lifetime of service do something that by its sheer existence says the hateful ideology of the terrorists has no place in our world; that kindness and compassion will always win over terror and violence; that when we come together as Americans with friends from throughout the globe we can withstand any challenge, we can reinvent, rebuild, re-imagine and create a better future for ourselves and the world.

Secretary Clinton was in New York on Friday and rang the opening bell on Wall Street. Afterward she said, “Let’s remember the past because we have to be smart and we have to be vigilant, but let’s look toward the future. Let’s show some confidence and some optimism. Let’s get the bells ringing. Let’s get some activity going... Let’s demonstrate, once again, why our resilience and our fortitude are going to keep us moving forward and keep us on top.”